Gods, Forms, and Socratic Piety

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The recent resurgence in Socratic scholarship has been rather unconcerned with the religious dimension of Socrates' thought. Yet there can be no doubt that there is such a dimension, and that it is significant to his philosophy. After all, Socrates was tried and found guilty of impiety. Moreover, Aristophanes' Socrates replaced Zeus with the new divinities of clouds and the convection principle. Xenophon's Socrates, the paragon of traditional piety, propounded a theistic cosmology. Plato's Socrates declared that to abandon philosophy would be to violate a divine command. So there is no reason to emulate Aristotle's silence on the topic of piety in his accounts of Socrates, and James Beckman's study, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates' Thought,* is a welcome attempt to fill this lacuna in recent scholarship.[1] The book is intended, however, not only for the student of Greek philosophy and culture but also for the general reader concerned with questions of religion, morals, and psychology. Much of the scholarly detail is relegated to extensive footnotes and appendices. There is also a glossary of Greek terms.

To elucidate the religious dimension of Socratic philosophy, Beckman examines the evidence for the historical Socrates, the passages of religious import in Plato's early dialogues, and the position of Socratic philosophy within the ebb and flow of the Greek experience of life.

In the first and preliminary chapter, Beckman examines the standard Socratic literature of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and concludes that in Plato's early dialogues we have the only reliable representation of Socratic philosophy in action. According to Beckman, the Socraticism of the early dialogues can be satisfactorily distinguished from the Platonism of the middle dialogues. Socrates was innocent of Plato's reified conception of the soul and his other-worldly orientation. For Plato, according to Beckman, the intellectual apprehension of transcendent Forms was possible only for the disembodied soul, whereas for Socrates this apprehension was possible for man in this world (p. 32). Furthermore, Plato supplanted Socrates' irony and professed ignorance with a mythical, or metaphorical, kind of knowledge (p. 31). One wonders if Beckman does not also regard Plato's theoretical proclivity towards a posthumous triumph as a myth or metaphor.

In the next chapter, Beckman examines Socrates' religious or theological

utterances and arguments in the early dialogues so as to reconstruct his conception of religion. Among the early dialogues, Beckman focuses his attention on the *Euthyphro* and *Apology*. They are of unique value to his enquiry, the former because of its topic, piety, and the latter because of Socrates' defense against the charge of impiety and his positive characterization of his philosophical activity as a religious mission.

Construing the dramatic sequence – the *Euthyphro* before the *Apology* – as the intended pedagogic sequence, Beckman interprets the *Apology* in the light of the *Euthyphro* but, unfortunately, not *vice versa* as well. As a result he does not consider, for instance, Euthyphro's definition of piety as the tendance (*Euthphr.* 13b) or service (13d) of the gods in the light of Socrates' own characterization of his philosophical activity as service to the god (*Ap.* 30a). Nor does Beckman reflect on Socrates' description of Euthyphro as a soothsayer (*Euthphr.* 3e) in the light of Socrates' observation that poets, like diviners and soothsayers, say many fine things without knowing whereof they speak (*Ap.* 22c). Beckman is precluded from comparing these Socratic observations and the Euthyphronic formulae of piety by his theses that piety cannot be defined in terms of the gods, and that philosophy can be adequately characterized without reference to them. Euthyphro proposes to define piety variously as "what all the gods love" (*Euthphr.* 9e), "the tendance of the gods" (12e), "a kind of service to the gods" (13d), and "the art of business transaction between gods and men" (14e). But if, as Beckman holds, all these formulae fail in the last analysis because they involve reference to the gods, they cannot illuminate what Socrates says of piety in the *Apology*.

Beckman's argument for the dispensability of the gods and the indefinability of piety in terms of them is as follows: Socrates is a seeker of wisdom and virtue. The conduct of his philosophical vocation is informed by a profound religious sense. But this sense is not rooted in his worship of the gods: the gods are superfluous to Socrates for whom the Forms of the virtues, including piety, suffice. If there are gods, they are what they are just because they exemplify the appropriate Forms perfectly. Thus, these Forms, of which piety is one, are logically prior to the gods. Hence, piety cannot be defined in terms of the gods, either as the service to them or as the worshipful obedience to their command (pp. 50, 52).

The claim that the Forms have replaced the gods underlies Beckman's central thesis that Socrates identifies religion and philosophy. They are not two compartments existing side by side. Nor is one prior to the other, as a purely naturalistic world-view would envisage, or as the theistic grounding of philosophy would imply (pp. 42-3, 68-9). Instead, philosophy and religion are thoroughly integrated. "In short, Socrates' philosophical way is . . . a fundamentally religious, though nonsupernatural, experience of the world" (p. 43).

In the third and final chapter, Beckman goes beyond Socrates' positive view of religion to that negative dimension of his philosophy which takes the highly idiosyncratic forms of irony, profession of ignorance, and silence. The question, as he puts it, is: "what was Socrates' real mind behind the facade of irony and ignorance?" (p. 118) According to Beckman, Plato answered this question when he supplanted Socrates' irony and profession of ignorance with sublime mysteries of beholding transcendent Forms. In the myth of the ascent of the winged charioteer and steeds to the vision of Forms in the *Phaedrus* (246a-248e) and in Diotima's speech initiating

Socrates into the holy contemplation of the Beautiful itself in the *Symposium* (209e-212a), "Plato has given expression to the truth which Socratic irony concealed: *the Socratic way was a religious initiation or passage through the philosophical* λόγος *to the vision of the Form as a sublime mystery*" (p. 175).

Beckman seems to be saying here that Plato revealed what Socrates resolutely concealed from the uninitiated. But if Socrates was committed to this concealment, he must have been equally committed, however implicitly, to that which he was concealing. And is what he was concealing the sublime mysteries of beholding transcendent Forms? Beckman himself denies this by implication when he writes (pp. 31-2):

> In his new-found quasi-religious "enthusiasm" for the proposition . . . that there was a realm in which the Forms stood as the objects of the deepest intellectual and spiritual aspirations of the human soul, Plato fired man with the prospect of transcending the human condition, of attaining a pure and sublime beholding of these eternal realities. In thus lending positivity to this separate world of the eternal Forms beyond bodily existence, Plato, through his religious excess, had jeopardized Socrates' life-stand on the "ignorant" finitude of the human condition.

Beckman's observation here raises a question: Did Plato inject the religious moment of initiation and contemplation into Socrates' agnosticism, or did he merely reveal that moment which Socrates held secretly? Beckman, it seems, is trying to have it both ways.

I would like to comment briefly on a few particulars involved in Beckman's interpretation of his general thesis that Socrates integrated religion and philosophy. My positive theses in the following comments will have to be substantiated elsewhere.

1. *Are Socratic Forms "separate"?* With R. E. Allen and against W. D. Ross and others, Beckman claims that Socratic Forms (that is, the Forms in Plato's early dialogues) are metaphysically separate from their instances. He uses this claim to argue that Socrates' recognition of the indescribability and indefinability of Forms, necessitated by their separation, accounts for his silence and irony (pp. 175-6), and that he replaced the Homeric gods with the separate Forms of the virtues (pp. 176-9). This claim involves several rather striking and very questionable theses: (i) that such locutions in the early dialogues as a Form being "in," "present" in, or "common" to particulars, and the particulars, in turn, "possessing" it or "sharing in" it should not be taken, as by Ross (*Plato's Theory of Ideas*, 2nd ed., p. 21), to indicate the immanence of Forms (pp. 235, 237); (ii) that the Socraticism of the early dialogues cannot be differentiated from the Platonism of the middle dialogues with respect to the ontological status of Forms (pp. 19, 241); (iii) that Aristotle was mistaken when he asserted (*Met.* 1078b30-2) that it was Plato, not Socrates, who separated Forms (p. 241); and (iv) that even Socrates suffers from "the worst difficulty" of transcendence raised in the *Parmenides*, the problem of relating a Form to its instances (133-4). Even for him, this problem was the "ultimate metaphysical mystery" (p. 31). Thus Beckman tells us (p. 31):

> What was irresoluble about the Socratic theory of Forms, then, was the dialectical tension between, on the one hand, the

> affirmation of *separateness* of Forms from the world, and, on the other hand, the affirmation of the *essential continuity* or *isomorphism* between the Forms and their corresponding instances in the world. In the context of his philosophical ignorance Socrates could only accept such a dialectical tension as irresoluble.

2. *Are the gods dispensable? Was Socrates an agnostic?* For Socrates, gods were perfect personal exemplifications of wisdom and the virtues. From this Beckman argues that "to know about the gods was logically irrelevant to the definition" (p. 50) of the virtues. It does not however follow, as Beckman believes, that "the question of the gods was peripheral to his [Socrates'] life's project" (p. 50).

Beckman holds that Socrates was just as agnostic about the gods as he was about the afterlife, and that his tentative belief in the gods provided no more "foundation or motivation for the conduct of life" (p. 74) than did his hope about the afterlife. Thus, regarding the divinity manifested in the oracle, Beckman observes (p. 74):

> He [Socrates] perceived the truth of the Oracle and took it to be divine. The God whence this truth came was the bearer of divine wisdom. To paraphrase Socrates' attitude, "there may indeed be a personal God such as the myths have maintained for as long as we can remember. This is not something I know, but I know that the non-existence of such a God is also something I don't know. And though I cannot pretend to know anything about such a God I may nonetheless plausibly, conjecturally posit such a divine being . . . "

The expression of agnosticism about the gods which Beckman attributes to Socrates here contrasts sharply with Socrates' own assertion to the judges: "I do believe in the gods . . . as none of my accusers does" (*Ap.* 35d). The clause "as none of my accusers does" indicates not how tentative his belief is but how fundamental a role his belief in the gods plays in his conduct of life. Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon may pay lip service to the gods, but their conduct is essentially impious. Socrates' conduct, in contrast, is pious. He tries to make sure that every act of his conforms to his positive belief in the gods. Here at *Apology* 35d he says he will not entreat the judges to acquit him because such an act would be inconsistent with his belief in the gods.

To be sure, Socrates' gods are not the same as Homer's. There are significant similarities and dissimilarities between them, as will be noted shortly, and this fact complicates Beckman's question whether Socrates believes in "a personal God such as the myths have maintained." Be that as it may, there is no question but that Socrates has the deepest allegiance to the gods as he conceives of them. For him, as we have seen, gods are perfect personal exemplifications of wisdom and the virtues. They necessarily embody in their intellect, character, and conduct the optimum state for man. Thus to be a god is an ideal. To believe in a god is to acknowledge and aspire to this ideal. It is to live one's life sustained and directed by that aspiration. Piety consists in the belief in the gods in this sense.

3. *Is piety logically independent of the gods? Are the gods pious?* As we have noted, it is Beckman's basic contention that, since a god is a god because he is, among other things, perfectly pious, divinity is to be defined in terms of piety, not *vice versa*. Thus, regarding Euthyphro's definition of holiness as "what all the gods love" (*Euthphr.* 9e), Beckman observes that he "has failed because he attempted to define

the holy in terms of the gods" (p. 49). Socrates' explanation of why this definition fails, however, is not that it refers to the gods, but that it gives only a πάθος instead of the οὐσία of the holy (11a-b).

Beckman's argument for the indefinability of the holy in terms of the gods is as follows:

> . . . he [Euthyphro] failed because he did not realize the implications of Socrates' conception of the εἶδος or ἰδέα, the holy in and by itself. The holy, as indeed every Form of a virtue, is what it is absolutely, without qualification. They do not depend on any other *thing* or *person* for what they are (which is not to settle the question as to whether one Form is defined in terms of another Form). Their οὐσία does not depend on any existent thing for its being what it is. They are from this point of view logical simples, or logical ultimates. The discussion in the *Euthyphro* has helped to make clear what is implicit in the Socratic first principles. The holy, and all the Forms, are *logically prior* to the gods (pp. 49-50).

Piety is logically prior to the gods in the sense that the piety of the pious act is not constituted by the gods' favorable attitude towards the act. The priority in question should not be taken, however, as it is by Beckman, to deny that piety is essentially man's relationship to the gods. In proceeding as he does, Beckman is relying on the general thesis that no reference to anything concrete can be made in the definition of a Form. According to this thesis, no Form can be a relation having things or persons as its *relata.* But then courage in and by itself could not be defined, as it was by Socrates himself, as "knowledge of what is to be feared and what is not" (*Prot.* 360d, cf. *Lach.* 196d), because the knowledge in question is implicitly of appropriate objects of fear *in concrete situations.* Since, as Beckman acknowledges, the object of Socratic knowledge was "the concrete moral life of man in this world" (p. 32), and Socratic virtue was definable in terms of Socratic knowledge, Beckman's view has the consequence that none of the Socratic virtues is definable. It is therefore no accident that he does not recognize Socrates' definition of courage (p. 176, n. 66) but asserts that "the εἶδος resisted every effort to give it linguistic, definitional form" (p. 176). The fact of the matter is that, in what Socrates says about the Form of holiness, there is nothing which precludes reference to the gods in its definition. As Beckman himself says, "Both τὸ ὅσιον and τὸ εὐσεβές imply some relationship to the gods" (p. 45), and this traditional implication is in no way denied by Socrates' expressions τὸ ὅσιον αὐτό (*Euthphr.* 5d2) and αὐτὸ τὸ εἶδος (6d10-11). All that αὐτό here connotes is that τὸ ὅσιον is an objective reality distinct from τὰ ὅσια and independent of human opinion and divine attitude.

If piety is indeed an essential attribute of a god, however, it would still follow that piety is logically prior to the gods and hence indefinable in terms of them. But, contrary to Beckman, I believe – and he gives no reason to believe otherwise – that, for Socrates, piety is not a divine attribute. True, a god, for Socrates, can be said to be θεῖος (*Phdr.* 249c6) and σοφός (*Ap.* 23a6), but not, I suspect, ὅσιος or εὐσεβής. True, wisdom and the virtues constitute divinity, but piety is not among those virtues. It is not, for the same reason that philosophy is not. Philosophy is, for Socrates, that aspiration for self-perfection which the gods, the ultimately wise, do not possess.

Piety is, for Socrates, the dedication to that inner calling for self-perfection to which the gods, the ultimately excellent, are not subject. Thus, philosophy and piety do fuse into one, but the gods cannot be said to be philosophical or pious.

Let us relate this Socratic fusion of philosophy and piety to the Homeric outlook on life, following Beckman's insights and orientation, but also taking into account the disagreements with him. By doing so we shall be able to see in what ways Socrates was a reformer and a preserver of Homeric perspectives on values, especially on piety.

Beckman develops an immensely interesting assessment of the historical significance of Socrates' religious and philosophical project against the background of the Homeric tradition and its crisis late in the fifth century B.C. (pp.132-181). Here is his assessment in outline: Homeric valuation contained two divergent perspectives, that of the individual and that of society. The former depicted excellence as consisting of "competitive virtues" like might, valor, and resourcefulness, while the latter inculcated "quiet" or "cooperative virtues" like justice or temperance. The competitive virtues enable one to flourish and prosper, while the quiet virtues are internalized social constraints (p. 162). The Homeric gods exemplified the former and sanctioned the latter. One was to pursue one's personal prosperity within the limits of justice sanctioned by the gods (pp. 156-7). But in the latter half of the fifth century this Homeric synthesis disintegrated. Divine sanction broke down, and considerations of righteousness and piety became incidental and peripheral (pp. 162-70). In this moral and religious crisis, the problem confronting Socrates was how to overcome the radical disharmony between the competitive and cooperative virtues. He responded by collapsing the two value systems into one, that of personal excellence and power, which he elevated to the intellectual apprehension of the supreme values (pp. 170-1). Here is the upshot of Beckman's account (p. 179):

> Socrates' radical recasting of the tradition had two main thrusts. First, to resolve an inherent antinomy in the old synthesis, and second, to sublimate it from the level of mere experience . . . to the level of philosophical insight. Divine transcendence was reinterpreted in terms of the pure, divine, eternal reality of the Forms, which represented at once the metaphysical essence or reality of the world and the ideal end or goal of human activity. The same profound attitudes of traditional religion were translated to these objects of philosophical inquiry. They constituted the supreme access given to a mortal human being to that realm of open, transcendent mystery within which human life was lived.

Against Beckman I have maintained the following theses: first, if, for Socrates, Forms are distinct but not separate from their instances, the mysteries of contemplating separate Forms are not Socratic but Platonic. Second, Socrates was far from being agnostic; his belief in the gods as perfect personal exemplifications of wisdom and the virtues was unqualified and played the central role in his life. Third, in the conceptual matrix of the Homeric tradition, piety is not logically independent of the gods, for it concerns man's relationship to the gods. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the early dialogues that the gods themselves can be said to be pious or impious. Therefore, although Socrates modified the Homeric conception of a god, he retained

the conceptual link between piety and divinity. These theses are consistent with and can be integrated into much of Beckman's analysis and evaluation of Socrates' historical role. What follows is a sketch of how I propose to effect this integration.

Socrates unified the two divergent evaluative systems of the Homeric tradition by reinterpreting the quiet virtues on the model of health. The quiet virtues were no longer a matter of moral constraints on one's quest for self-interest; they were now the very object of one's quest. On realizing that one's actual condition is less than optimum, one will be motivated to attain the optimum state as a matter of vital necessity. Here Socratic *eros* and Socratic morality cooperate, and obligation and teleology come together. In conceiving this project of "the improvement of the soul," Socrates used the image of a god to symbolize the optimum state. Here he was drawing on the Homeric conception of a god as both the idealized possessor of the competitive virtues and the enforcer of the quiet virtues. He was also drawing on a fundamental assumption of Homeric anthropomorphism, the assumption that man is the adequate conceptual model for the divine (p. 145). Accordingly, the traditional piety as submissive reverence of the gods was transformed into devotion to the project of self-perfection. This transformation, however, left the logic of Homeric piety intact. Socratic piety was still the worshipful obedience to "the command of the god," and it was still "service to the gods," though, to be sure, not in Euthyphro's sense. It was, in Plato's words, προθυμεῖσθαι . . . ὁμοιοῦσθαι θεῷ, "to be eager to be like a god" (*Resp.* 613b). Only the final object of pious aspiration shifted, from the gods to their divinity itself, namely, their wisdom and virtues. Divinity was not transcendent in the ontological sense. It was the very perfection of the perfected soul of man.

In the conceptual network of Homeric values, piety or holiness is not in its own right one of the quiet, cooperative virtues. Rather, piety becomes a kind of comprehensive quiet virtue by association because the gods sanction the quiet virtues and piety consists in the sincere acknowledgment of such divine sanction. For this reason, unlike the other quiet virtues, piety characterizes man's relationship to the gods, and the gods themselves are not subject to the judgment of piety or impiety. When Socrates united the competitive and quiet virtues, he retained these unique conceptual features of Homeric piety. As a result, for Socrates, piety was not one of the virtues constitutive of divinity just as philosophy, the quest for wisdom, was not an ingredient of divinity. As philosophy was to wisdom, so was piety to divinity. But since wisdom and divinity were one, so were philosophy and piety.

Despite my disagreements and strictures, the indebtedness of this account to Beckman is obvious. His book is insightful, thoughtful, and energetic. It is not possible to read it without deepening one's understanding of the *Apology* and *Euthyphro,* or without being provoked to think further about Socrates' mission against the background of Greek life. In short, it is a significant contribution to classical scholarship and an indispensable discussion of the religious dimension in Socrates' thought.[2]

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NOTES

[1] James Beckman, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates' Thought* (Waterloo, Ont.: Sir Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1979) 274 pp., $6.00.

[2] I thank my colleagues Virgil Aldrich, David Bennett, Mendel Cohen, Don Garrett, and Clifton McIntosh for their helpful comments, and especially an anonymous reviewer for his critical comments on an earlier draft. Some of the ideas expressed in this discussion-article stem from a project I worked on as a David P. Gardner Faculty Fellow, University of Utah, in the autumn quarter of 1977-78.